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DER TAG

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J. M. BARRIE

DER TAG

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A Play


BY

J. M. BARRIE

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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*A bare chamber, lighted by a penny
dip which casts shadows. On a
hard chair by the table sits an
Emperor in thought. To him come
his Chancellor and an Officer.*

CHANCELLOR

Your Imperial Majesty——

OFFICER

Sire——

(The Emperor rises.)

EMPEROR

Is that the paper? *(Indicating paper
in Chancellor's hand.)*

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CHANCELLOR

(Giving it to him) It only awaits your Imperial Majesty's signature.

OFFICER

When you have signed that paper, sire, the Fatherland will be at war with France and Russia.

EMPEROR

At last ! This little paper——

CHANCELLOR

Not of the value of a bird's feather until it has your royal signature. Then—— !

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EMPEROR

Then it will sing round the planet, the vibration of it will not pass in a hundred years. How still the world has grown since I raised this pen. All Europe's listening. Europe! That's Germany when I have signed. And yet——

OFFICER

Your Imperial Majesty is not afraid to sign?

EMPEROR

(Flashing) Afraid!

OFFICER

(Abject) Oh, sire!

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EMPEROR

I am irresistible to-day. "Red blood boils in my veins, to me every open door is the gift of a world, I hear a thousand nightingales, I could eat all the elephants of Hindustan and pick my teeth with the spire of Strasburg cathedral."

OFFICER

That is the Fatherland to-day. Such as we are, that you have made us, each seeking to copy you, in so far as man can repeat his deity. It was you who fashioned us into a sword, sire, and now the sword must speak.

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EMPEROR

(*Approvingly*) There the sword spoke. And yet the wise one said, "Take not your enemies together but separately, lest the meal go to them instead of to you." One at a time! (*To Chancellor*) Why am I not friend of Russia till France is out of the way, or France's friend until the Bear is muzzled? That was your part.

CHANCELLOR

For that I strove, but their mean minds suspected me. Sire, your signature?

EMPEROR

What of Britain?

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EMPEROR

(Intently) This. THE DAY to which
we have so often drunk draws
near.

EMPEROR

The Day ! To the Day !

*(All salute The Day with their
swords)*

But when ?

OFFICER

Now if she wants it.

EMPEROR

There is no road to Britain—until
our neighbours are subdued. Then,

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for us, there will be no roads that do not lead to Britain.

CHANCELLOR

(Suavely) Your Imperial Majesty, Britain will not join in just now.

EMPEROR

If I was sure of that ?

CHANCELLOR

I vouch for it. So well we've chosen our time it finds her at issue with herself, her wild women let loose, her colonies ready to turn against her, Ireland aflame, her paltry British army sulking with the civic powers.

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EMPEROR

These wounds might heal suddenly if German bugles sounded. It is a land that in the past has done things.

OFFICER

In the past, your Imperial Majesty ; but in the past alone lies Britain's greatness.

EMPEROR

Yes, that's the German truth. Britain has grown dull and sluggish : a belly of a land, she lies overfed, no dreams within her such as keep Powers alive ; and timid too—without red blood in her, but in its stead a thick yellowish

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fluid. The most she'll play for is her own safety ; pretend to grant her that, and she'll seek her soft bed again. Britain's part in the world's making is done : "I was," her epitaph.

CHANCELLOR

How well you know her, sire. All she needs is some small excuse for saying : "I acted in the best interests of my money bags." That excuse I've found for her. *I* have promised in your name a secret compact with her that if she stands aloof, the parts of France we do not at present need we will not at present take.

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EMPEROR

A secret bargain over the head of France, her friend! Surely an infamous proposal.

CHANCELLOR

The British Government will not think so. Trust me to know them, sire. Your signature?

EMPEROR

(Gleaming) I can fling a million men within the week across the border by way of Alsace and Lorraine.

OFFICER

(Frowning) There are a hundred gates to open that way.

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EMPEROR

My guns shall open them.

OFFICER

(*With meaning*) You can think of no easier road, sire?

EMPEROR

I think of it night and day.

OFFICER

One farther north—through Belgium.

EMPEROR

If I could dare! But no, that road is barred.

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OFFICER

(*Misunderstanding*) On the contrary,
sire——

EMPEROR

Barred by a fortress no gun of mine
may bear against—by honour, by our
plighted word.

OFFICER

Yes, sire——

EMPEROR

(*After hesitating*) No, no, I will not
so stain my name.

CHANCELLOR

I am with you, sire, but I fear it will

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not be so with France. She has grown cynical. She will find the road through Belgium.

EMPEROR

You seek to tempt me. She also signed the treaty.

CHANCELLOR

Your Imperial Majesty judges others by yourself. I have private ground for fearing that in the greed for a first advantage, France will call the treaty but a scrap of paper.

EMPEROR

I think your private ground may be your own private newspaper.

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CHANCELLOR

She will say that necessity knows no law, or some such dastard words.

EMPEROR

Belgium is no craven : she will fight the betrayer.

CHANCELLOR

France will hack her way through.

EMPEROR

My Chancellor, that is a hideous phrase.

CHANCELLOR

I ask your pardon, sire. It came, somehow, pat to my lips.

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OFFICER

Your Imperial Majesty, the time passes—will it please you to sign?

CHANCELLOR

Buonaparte would have acted quickly.

EMPEROR

Buonaparte !

CHANCELLOR

The paper, sire.

EMPEROR

Leave it now with me. Return in an hour, and you shall have it signed.

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OFFICER

(Warningly) The least delay——

CHANCELLOR

Over-much reflection——

EMPEROR

I wish to be alone.

*(They retire respectfully, but anxious.
He is left alone in thought.)*

EMPEROR

Even a King's life is but a day, and
in his day the sun is at its zenith once.
This is my zenith. Others will come
to Germany, but not to me. The

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world pivots on me to-night. They said Buonaparte! coupling me with him. To dim Napoleon! Paris in three weeks—say four to cover any chance miscalculation. Russia on her back in six, with Poland snapping at her; and then after a breathing space we reach—The Day! We sweep the English Channel, changing its name as we embark, and cross by way of Calais, which will have fallen easily into our hands. The British Fleet destroyed—for that is part of the plan,—Dover to London is a week of leisured marching, and London itself, unfortified and panic-stricken, falls in a day. Væ Victis! I'll leave conquered Britain

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some balls to play with, so that there be no uprising. Next I carve America in great mouthfuls for my colonists, for now I stride the seas. It's all so docketed I feel it's as good as done before I set forth to do it. Dictator of the World! And all for pacific ends, for once the whole is mine we come at last to the great desideratum, a universal peace. Rulers over all! God in the heavens, I upon the earth—we two! (*Raising his eyes threateningly*) And there are still the Zeppelins! I'll sign.

(The Spirit of Culture appears—a noble female figure in white robes.)

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Who's that ?

CULTURE

A friend. I am Culture, who has so long hovered, well pleased, over happy Germany.

EMPEROR

(Who gives her royal honour) A friend, indeed—a consort. I would hear you say, O Queen, that I have done some things for you.

CULTURE

You have done much for me. I have held my head higher since you were added to the roll of Sovereigns.

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I may have smiled at you at times, as when you seemed to think that you were the two of us in one ; but, as Kings go, you have been a worthy King.

EMPEROR

It was all done for you.

CULTURE

So for long I thought. I looked upon Germany's golden granaries, plucked from ground once barren, its busy mills and furnaces, its outstretching commerce and teeming peoples and noble seats of learning, all mellowing in the sun ; and I heard you say they were dedicated to me, and I was

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proud. You have honoured me, my Emperor; and now I am here to be abased by you. All the sweet garments you have robed me in—tear them off me, and send me naked out of Germany.

EMPEROR

You would not have me sign?

CULTURE

I warn you first to know yourself, you who have gloated in a looking-glass too long.

EMPEROR

I sign that Germany may be greater

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still. To spread your banner farther:
thus I make the whole world cultured.

CULTURE

My banner needs no such spreading.
It has ever been your weakness to
think that I have no other home save
here in Germany. I have many
homes, and the fairest is in France.

EMPEROR

If that were true, Germany would
care less for you.

CULTURE

If that is true, I have never had a

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home in Germany. I am no single nation's servant, no single race's queen. I am not of German make. My banner is in every land on which you would place your heel. I'll not have you say it is for me you fight. Find some other reason.

EMPEROR

The jealousies of nations——

CULTURE

All are guilty there. Jealousy, not love of money, is the root of all evil. That was a misprint. Yet I know of nothing those others want that is yours to give, save Peace. What do you

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want of them? Bites out of each, and when they refuse to be dismembered you cry "The blood be on their head, they force me into war."

EMPEROR

Germany must expand. That is her divine mission. I have it from on high.

CULTURE

Your system of espionage is known to be tolerably complete.

EMPEROR

All Germany is with me. I hold in leash the mightiest machine for war the world has forged.

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CULTURE

I have seen your legions, and all are with you. Never was a lord more trusted. O Emperor, does not that make you pause ?

EMPEROR

France invades little Belgium.

CULTURE

Chivalrous France! Never. Emperor, I leave you. One last word to you at the parting of the ways. France, Russia, Britain, these are great opponents, but it is not they will bring the pillars of Germany down. Beware of Belgium !

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(She goes. He is left in two minds; he crosses to sign, flings down pen, strikes bell. Chancellor and Officer re-appear.)

CHANCELLOR

Your Imperial Majesty has signed?

EMPEROR

Thus! *(He tears the paper.)*

OFFICER

Sire!

EMPEROR

Say this to Russia, France and Britain in my Imperial name : So long

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as they keep within their borders, I remain in mine.

OFFICER

But, sire——

EMPEROR

You know as I do, that is all they ask for.

CHANCELLOR

You were the friend of Austria!

EMPEROR

I'll prove it. Tell her from me that Serbia has yielded on every point which doth become a nation, and that Austria may accept her terms.

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CHANCELLOR

Nay, sire——

EMPEROR

And so there will be no war.

OFFICER

Sire, we beg——

EMPEROR

These are my commands.

*(They have to go, chagrined but
deferential.)*

EMPEROR

The decision lay with^{er}_a me, and I said

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“There shall be peace”; that be my zenith!

(He goes back to the chair. He sleeps peacefully. In the distance a bell tolls the Angelus, and suddenly this is broken by one boom of a great gun, which reverberates and should be startling. The Spirit of Culture returns, now with a wound in her breast. She surveys him sadly.)

CULTURE

Sleep on, unhappy King. *(He grows restless)* Nay, better to wake, if even your dreams appal you.

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(He wakes, and for a moment he scarcely understands that he has been dreaming. The realisation is tragic to him.)

EMPEROR

You! You have come here to mock me.

CULTURE

Oh, no.

EMPEROR

I dreamt there was no war. In my dream they came to me and I forbade the war. I saw the Fatherland smiling and prosperous, as it was before the war.

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CULTURE

It was you who made the war, O
Emperor.

EMPEROR

Belgium?

CULTURE

There is no Belgium now. But over
what was Belgium there rests a soft
light as of a halo, and through it is a
flaming sword.

EMPEROR

I dreamt I had kept my plighted
word to Belgium.

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CULTURE

It was you, O Emperor, who broke your plighted word and laid waste the land. In your lust for victory you violated even the Laws of War which men contrive so that when the sword is sheathed they may dare again face their Maker. Your way to Him is lighted now by smouldering spires and ashes that were once fair academic groves of mine. And you shall seek Him over roads cobbled with the moans of innocents.

EMPEROR

In my dream I thought England was grown degenerate and would not fight.

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CULTURE

She fought you where Crecy was
and Agincourt and Waterloo, with all
their dead to help her. The dead be-
came quick in their ancient graves,
stirred by the tread of the island feet,
and they cried out, "How is England
doing?" The living answered the dead
upon their bugles with the "All's
well." England, O Emperor, was
grown degenerate, but you have made
her great again.

EMPEROR

France, Russia ?

CULTURE

They are here, around your walls.

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EMPEROR

My people ?

CULTURE

I see none marching, but men whose feet make no sound. Shades of your soldiers, who pass on and on in never-ending lines.

EMPEROR

Do they curse me ?

CULTURE

None. They all salute you as they pass. They have done your bidding.

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EMPEROR

The women curse me?

CULTURE

Not even the women. They, too, salute you. You were their father and could do no wrong.

EMPEROR

And you?

CULTURE

I have come with this gaping wound in my breast, to bid you farewell.

EMPEROR

God cannot let my Germany be utterly destroyed.

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CULTURE

If God is with the Allies, Germany
will not be destroyed. Farewell!

*(She is going; she lifts a pistol
from the table and puts it in his
hand. She goes with shining eyes.
The penny dip burns low. The great
Emperor is lost in its shadows.)*

END

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